



ASPECTS OF RITES AND RITUALS: A STUDY AMONG THE MISHINGS OF CHAINAKI MISHING VILLAGE OF UDAIPUR, TINSUKIA DISTRICT, ASSAM.

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ABSTRACT

Religion may be marked as any set of attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural power which may vary within a culture as well as among societies and may change over time. We do not find any primitive as well as modern society without rites and rituals associated to one's religious beliefs. In this paper a humble attempt has been made to highlight some of the aspects of religious rites and rituals of the Mishings, one of the largest groups of Scheduled Tribes (plains) of Assam. It is primarily based on a fieldwork carried out among the Mishing people of Chainaki Mishing village of Udaipur of Tinsukia district, Assam. The findings of the present study reflects that they are the followers of their traditional animistic religious belief system Donyi Poloism. However, their religion is also aptly marked by the adoption of Vaishnavite beliefs and practices.

KEYWORDS: Rites, rituals, benevolent- malevolent deities, appeasement etc.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is an indispensable part of all cultures. It consists of beliefs and behavior patterns by which people try to control the area of the universe that is otherwise beyond their control. The pioneer Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as "a belief in spiritual being". He emphasized on the cognatic element and gave an impression that religious attitude is a personal being but the accumulated evidence indicates that an object may also be an impersonal being or force. Another scholar, A. Wallace defined religion as "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature."

Religion gives a sacred authority to a society's rules and values (Durkheim, 1912: 9). A.R. Radcliffe Brown writing a foreword to Srinivas's work on religion among the Coorgs of South India had remarked that the study of religions can be approached in many different ways and can present a number of different kinds of problems" (M.N. Srinivas, 1952). Religion is characterized by a belief in supernatural beings and forces. Supernatural beings may be grouped into three categories- major deities (Gods and Goddesses), non-human spirit beings and ancestral spirits. Religion is the origin of rites and rituals which means the system of faith and worship. Rites and rituals are one of the most important institutions of human culture which relate people to each other on special occasions. It is the expression of the manner and type of adjustment affected by people with their concept of the supernatural. The most widespread manifestation of the mental attitude regarding supernatural is in the form of beliefs and rites. Rites consist of the observance according to a prescribed manner for certain actions designed to establish liaison between the performing individual and the supernatural power or powers. Beliefs constitute the static part of religion and the rites are the dynamic part. In early societies burial had religious significance (Ember and Peregrine, 2007: 462).

Religion plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of the Mishings of the village under study. The Mishing people of the Chainaki village are the followers of their traditional belief system *Donyi Poloism* where they worship sun and moon God. Besides, they also follow Mahapurushiya Vaishnava Dharma. They worship Lord Vishnu and its principal incarnation Lord Krishna as their supreme worshipping Gods. Beliefs regarding benevolent and malevolent deities and spirits is also found to be prevalent among them. They offer their reverence to '*Dangoriya*' and '*Aai matri*' as their benevolent deities. The malevolent deities are '*Jolkai Dangoriya*', '*no boni*', and '*baro boni*'. Goddess Lakshmi whom they believe to be the residing deity of crops is worshipped by them as well.

Rites and rituals observed by the community (Household level rituals and rituals performed in community level):

Observations of religious rites are an integral part of the religious life of the Mishings. Through prayer, offerings and general ritualistic activities, the people appeal to the supernatural world for aid. The Mishings of Chainaki village observe various rituals both in their common place of worship, the *Namghar* and their households. Most of the responsibilities to perform rituals belongs to the *medhi* or *mibu*, who is the religious specialist of the village. He is also addressed as *Namgharia* (referring to be the custodian of the namghar) and is the socially initiated and ceremonially inducted member of the religious organization of the village. The Bhakats, a group of elderly villagers, also assist the *Medhi* in the performance of the rituals.

In the *Namghar* the principal rituals which are observed are Janmashtami, *Awang* and *Paal Sewa*. Janmashtami marks the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna, one of the chief Gods they worship. It is observed in the month of '*Bhada*' (which usually falls in the month of August -September). Observation of Janmashtami rites comprises of Nam kirtan. All the village people gather in the *Namghar* for the Nam kirtan. It begins with the arrangement of *Xorai* (disc on stand) where soaked grams, rice, fruits etc. are offered. The *xorai* is placed in the middle of four half-cut banana plants vertically made to stand, attached by four *holas* (thin bamboo sticks) above which the *Sandrataap* (a sacred piece of cloth which is hung over like a canopy in the center of the altar of a religious place) is tied. Earthen lamps are lighted below each of the banana plants along with flowers, a *giri* (a small pot made of bell metal) full of water, few mango leaves and leaves of bel. Then the Naam kirtan begins with a bow in the beginning and ends with another towards the ending. After that the offerings are distributed among all as *prokhaad*.

Paal sewa is another religious ceremony performed every year in the *Namghar* for the peace and prosperity of the village. The locally believed deities '*Dangoriya*' and '*Aai matri*' are worshipped in this ceremony. Three fowl (one red colored cock i.e. *rokpo*, one yellowish-brown colored hen and one white colored hen i.e. *rongne*) are sacrificed. The sacrificed fowls are cooked with ground rice, *pitha*. A vegetable curry with a variety of vegetables is also prepared. Two numbers of '*bhogs*' (ritual food) are offered in the name of the aforementioned deities with *nogin apong* (rice beer) and the cooked meat. Everyone bows down before their *Dangoriya* for blessings and takes to drink *nogin apong* after the *Medhi* and the other *bhakats*.

Awang is a rite performed for the peace and wellbeing of the village in the month of *bohag* in the month April-May. The essentially required things of this rite are- one red coloured cock, one red coloured hen, one white coloured hen, vegetables, betel nuts, betel vine leaves, *nogin apong* and so on. A pair of fowls is offered in the name of their deity of the *Namghar* whom they call as '*Namgharar dangoriya*'. The white hen is offered in the name of '*Aai matri*'. The fowls are sacrificed in the name of their deities. The elderly villagers then collectively prepare the food for that ritual day. The '*medhi*' offers a *bhog* in a *xorai* where cooked rice, vegetable curry and the chicken cooked are offered. Two bowls of *nogin apong*, one in the name of the *Namgharar dangoriya* and another in the name of *Aai matri*, are offered. After bowing down and seeking blessings from the deities everyone is allowed to begin eating the food served.

Demonstrating their belief in a number of malevolent deities or spirits (*uie*) the Mishings of the Chainaki village performs many rites and rituals. When a village member becomes a victim of evil spirits i.e. when they believe the malevolent deities curses them, they perform certain rites to appease and propitiate them to recover from the ailments which they believe to be the result of the curses. The following are the rites and rituals performed for the aforementioned appeasements:

- i) **Shikari Puja:** '*Shikari dangoriya*' is one of the malevolent deities the Mishings believe in. The symptoms of the curse by this very malevolent deity is principally characterized by immense body pain. For performing the *Shikari Puja* the essential ingredients required are- ginger, *poro apong*, one red coloured cock, vegetables etc. It is

performed in the jungle underneath a huge tree. The one who is suffering is taken to the place where the puja is to be solemnized accompanied by two or three villagers. A cap made of the flower of a banana plant (*koldil*), a bow and an arrow, seven sticks made of bamboo (*taapi*), are carried along. Of these sticks two are put in the East direction and the other two in the West. The red cock is then sacrificed and cooked as per the wish of the person suffering. The deity is invoked with the offerings and blessings are sought so that the ailing person recovers well. After eating is done everyone returns back.

- ii) **Shiva puja:** Lord shiva is one of the worshipped deities of the Mishings of the village under study. According to the villagers although Lord shiva cannot be considered to be malevolent yet they include His curse along with the curse of the other malevolent deities. The symptoms of this curse are chiefly characterized by excessive yawning and frequent illness. After identifying these symptoms at the initial stages one red coloured cock (preferably matured) is offered in the name of *Shiva dangoriya* and kept it until the ailing person becomes little well. On another stipulated day, the ritual is performed. It is also performed in the jungle underneath a big tree. The ailing person is being taken to the place of observance of the ritual. A *trishool dambaru* (a small drum which is symbolized to be carried by Lord Shiva), *kani* (opium), *noggin apong* are essential things to be carried. These are placed at a corner upon a banana leaf. A small area is cleaned under a tree, then four sticks are put around which a white thread is tied. A banana leaf is then placed upon it. The cock is sacrificed on that arranged area by the *Medhi*. The head of the cock is kept on that area itself along with its feather then cooked rice and meat is prepared. Some rice, meat, *nogin apong* are served on a banana leaf and kept in the ritual area. On the right side the *apong* is placed while the water on the left. The deity is invoked with the offerings and blessings are sought so that the person suffering recovers soon.

- iii) **Jolkai dangoriya sakam:** *Jolkai dangoriya* is another malevolent deity of the Mishings. It is believed that they reside in the water bodies. The symptoms of the curse given by this deity are characterized by severe dysentery and fever. A male black colored duck is essentially required in this sakam. On the day of first observance of the symptoms of this curse a *tupula* (a small pouch wrapped with banana leaf) of ginger is offered in the name of *Jolkai dangoriya*. After a day or two *nogin apong* is prepared and rituals are performed. The rituals related to this *sakam* are performed in the jungle. The duck is sacrificed by the *Medhi*. The sacrificed duck is then cooked keeping its head, legs and feathers aside. A small boat-like structure is prepared by the soft barks of banana tree (*kolgosor dung*) which is replaced by *molam* (an earthenware) nowadays, upon which the head, legs and feathers of the duck are placed and kept where the rites are performed. The deity is invoked with the offerings and blessings are sought so that the person suffering recovers well and after that the rituals are concluded with the eating of the prepared food by the ailing person as well as the other members.

- iv) **Rituals associated with the curses of Noboni- Saat boni- Baro boni:** The Mishings of Chainaki village believes in these three malevolent deities and that when they curse the villagers suffer from many ailments. For performing rites for recovering from the curse of *No boni* a white male duck is sacrificed. For *Baro boni* and *Saat boni* also a male white colored duck is sacrificed. The rites related to it are performed near a river. After sacrificing the duck, its legs, head and feathers are placed in a *molam* and allowed to flow away in the river.

Bamut is another ritual performed by the Mishings when a family member becomes a victim of evil spirits (also when their *Dangoriya* curses him or her). *Nogin apong*, a pair of red colored cock and a red-colored hen, *pitha* (ground rice) are essentially used. In this puja the tail portion of both the cock and hen is touched with a burning flame. The *Medhi* is invited and he offers all these items in front of the ailing person. An earthen lamp is lighted by one of the family members and then prayer is offered to the deities to bless the entire family and help the person suffering recover soon. The pair of fowls are then sacrificed and cooked. The prepared food is then given to the ailing person and *Medhi*. The rest of the food is taken by the family members.

Another two household-level rituals are also performed by the Mishings inhabiting Chainaki village. These two rituals are *Napurukhiya sakam* and *Saatjaniya sakam*.

Napurukhiya sakam:

Napurukhiya sakam is one of the rituals observed with regard to the appeasement of household deities. They call it 'gharar dangoriya'. Their dead ancestors of nine generations are included in this category. Some people observe perform the rites of *Napurukhiya sakam* with a female pig while some prefer tortoise. The ritualistic requisite of the *Napurukhiya sakam* is that the animal must be four-footed. It is observed preferably in the month of *fagun* or *jeth* (March/May). Prior to the observance of the *Napurukhiya sakam* the *Medhi* is invited and he makes a *tupula* and in a dish made of brass metal nine betel nuts and betel vine leaves,

nine rupees, nine pots full of rice, medicines for preparing *apong*, all of these are carefully wrapped with a banana leaf and kept hung in a corner in the East direction of the kitchen. Then after a week or sometimes a month, a day is selected for performing the rites. On the *sakam* day, nine *bhakats* (elderly members of the village) including the *Medhi*, are invited. It is to be noted here that the eight invited *bhakats* must have performed the *Dodgang* rituals of their dead fathers (which they refer as *Pitri karma*). Moreover, another significant thing to note is that sons of a same father are not allowed to be invited to take part in this *sakam*. It is because both the sons will have or share a common 'purukh' (ancestor). These conditions must be maintained for each *bhakats* belonging to nine different 'purukhs' or ancestors for the participation in the *Napurukhiya sakam*.

Nine varieties of vegetables and *apong* are the essential requirements of this ritual. On the day of the *sakam* the *Medhi* and the *bhakats* are at first welcomed after any of the female members of the family washes their feet with water and offer them seats. The *Medhi* himself or on his request any one of the *bhakats* bring down the *tupula* that was hung earlier. They then offer the tortoise or pig in the name of their ancestors and cuts the meat into pieces and prepares the food for that day. The meat is cooked with black gram and a curry is prepared with the nine variety of vegetables. After the food preparation gets over the family members offer the nine *orihonas* (offering of money to the *bhakats* as an essential part of religious ceremonies) with nine betel nuts and betel vine leaves and takes a bow for the blessings of their ancestors. Then the *bhakats* begin having their food and distribute the *orihonas* equally among themselves. It is carefully ensured that none of the *bhakats* should receive an unequal amount of *orihona* not even a single rupee. This marks the end of the *Napurukhiya sakam*.

Saatjaniya sakam: *Saatjaniya sakam* is another household level ritual which is performed to appease the ancestors of seven generations. In this *sakam* *Xaal* fish (locally known as *taalo ongoh*) is essentially required. Some people also prefer black colored female duck. Seven varieties of vegetables are required for the *Saatjaniya sakam*. Seven *bhakats*, including the *Medhi*, are invited. The rituals observed are similar like that of the *Napurukhiya sakam*. The differences lie only in the requirement of *xaal* fish, seven *bhakats* and seven varieties of vegetables. The Mishings of the village believes that when agricultural productivity faces severe loss or when they experience too much of financial hurdles the deities of seven generations have put a curse on them. So, in order to appease them, they perform the *Saatjaniya sakam*.

Dobur Puja: Among all the rituals observed by the Mishings of Chainaki village *Dobur puja* occupies a central place. Observance of *Dobur puja* reflects their traditional belief system *Donyi Poloism* where they worship the sun and moon Gods. It is observed in the month of May or June. The rites of *Dobur* begin with the beating at the walls of houses with sticks made of bamboo by the male members of the village. Every household presents their offerings for the puja which includes cock, hen, rice, different vegetables and the likes. These offerings are collected from the entire village and then taken to a selected area under a *Dimoru* (fig) tree. Reaching the selected area, a *tassuk* (a basket made of bamboo which is used to filter the local rice beers they prepare from ash as well as rice known as *poro apong* and *nogin apong*) is made for the filtration of *poro apong*, one of the essential requirements of the *Dobur* rituals.

A small portion of land is cleared and a banana leaf is then placed with some amount of *poro apong* in it. Two individuals whose both of the parents are alive are chosen to take initiation in the sacrificing rite of the fowls in the name of *Donyi Polo* along with their dead ancestors (*sineh mabo*) and the deities they pay reverence to (*Da – dangoriya*). After taking a bow for blessings the two chosen individuals, one standing on the right with the red-colored cock (*rokpo*) and the other on the left with the red-colored hen (*rongne*) facing towards the sun sacrifices them by striking against the banana leaf which was placed on the ground with *poro apong*. They then separate the heads and legs of the two fowl, take some feathers and along with some fellow villagers goes to put one of the heads and some feathers at the village entrance with a stick and the other with the legs at the end of the village boundary in order to mark the ongoing of *Dobur puja* in the village. After coming back from the marking, preparation for cooking is done. The meat of the sacrificed fowls is cooked in two halves. One half is cooked by boiling with vegetables and the other half is cooked by roasting in open fire. Use of oil and spices is strictly forbidden on that day. Only salt and chillies could be used. After taking a bow for the blessings of their Gods and Goddesses everyone begins eating the cooked food with *poro apong*. After that everyone returns to their respective houses.

There are certain significant things to be noted about the *Dobur puja*, one of which is that when the village observes *Dobur*, the entire village undergoes a *gena* period. During this *gena* period, no works are to be done in the village which include cutting of land, ploughing and other household chores. Prior to the completion of the *Dobur* rituals no one in the village must consume meat or fish (or any non-vegetarian food items). However, after the completion of the rituals everyone can. If anyone from outside comes to the village on the day on which *Dobur puja* is observed, he or she has to stay in the village. If he or she cannot stay then in that case they must leave something that belongs to them before leaving, which could either be a cloth item or watch or any personal belonging. If they deny, it is believed that Goddess Lakshmi also leaves along with them and

this bring bad omen to the village

CONCLUSION

The Mishing people of the Chainaki village are very humble and peaceful people who have their own values. They are the followers of their traditional animistic religious belief system Donyi Poloism. Their religion is also aptly marked by the adoption of Vaishnavite beliefs, following which they refer themselves to be the disciples of Mahapurushiya Vaishnava Dharma. They have a vivid series of religious rites and rituals. Sacrifice of birds and animals forms a significant part of their ritualistic activities. They perform both household level as well as community level rituals in a year. It could be well asserted that the system of faith and worship that the Mishings of the Chainaki village follow is a syncretic entity as because the element of syncretism have been observed during the study, that is following a diverse system of beliefs and practices entailing both traditional animism and Hindu Vaishnavism.

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